

# A U.S.-India Relationship That's **Hilarious** and **Romantic**

Three years ago journalist, non-fiction author and *ghazal* writer Neelesh Misra turned his typing fingers from hijackings and palace intrigues to something much more important: love. Star-crossed love, of course.

The result was the publication in October 2006 of the readable, funny *Once Upon a Time Zone*... It's about an Indian call center worker who must pretend to be an American, with a fake name and accent, so he can handle service calls from U.S. customers. But then one of the customers falls for the phony him, and she's not being entirely truthful either.

One could draw all kinds of thoughtful insights about our modern, interconnected world where it's so easy to actually be disconnected, to be someone you are not. And perhaps there is an allegory somewhere here about the 60-year dance of getting-to-know-you between India and America, always clearly meant to be friends but somehow, for decades, star-crossed.

Well, forget all that. This is a fun book. You'll burst out laughing at parts. You'll be rooting for your favorite characters. You can see the movie playing in your head, and you'll want to see it on screen, too, if feelers Misra has had from Bollywood come to fruition.

Meanwhile, *Timezone* has sold about 8,000 copies, decent for India's English-language market,

and HarperCollins Publishers India are coming out with a new edition in December. Apparently, this version may be missing the whimsical cover art showing the Statue of Liberty in a sari. That's a shame.

Misra's training as a journalist is evident. He knows how to tell a tale and the detail makes one think he goes through life jotting down every conversation he overhears and noting the intricacies of passing strangers' faces. For a man who had made one three-week trip to New York before writing the novel, he noticed an awful lot, and got it right. Except for the stuff about getting a visa to the United States. I'm required, I'm sure, to state categorically that no one like *that* could get a visa *that* way. I mustn't say more because it would spoil Misra's skillful build-up to the highpoint of the novel, a description of the most entertaining chess match ever.

Actually, Misra says that being a journalist "was a big pain at the beginning" as he tried to switch to novel writing. "I was...used to the disciplined, tight, no-nonsense style of agency writing," he says. "In fact, when I showed the first three chapters to my editor, Nandita Aggarwal, early on, she said things were happening too fast, and that I should relax, set myself free!"

He also realized that "fiction is the most difficult form of writing. ...Initially, I was fairly comfort-

able—and perhaps complacent—about the thought of writing fiction. But when I had written 50,000 words and nine chapters, I asked myself: 'Dude, where is the story?' The plot hadn't even properly started rolling. So I started a major revision."

Misra says the spark for the novel came during his first visit to New York in 2002. "But the novel that I then wanted to write was something completely different—dark and tragic. The second spark came the year after, when I was driving home to the New Delhi sub-

urb of Noida where I then lived, and drove past an outsourcing facility. Before I reached home, I had started wondering: What would it be like, living out a different identity at work? And what if someone fell in love with this fake identity? That is how I began work."

Misra did a lot of research and talked to friends who worked at call centers. "At one point," he says, "I even wanted to work in a call center for some time to get a first-hand look, but I had no vacation days left!"



*Once Upon a Timezone...*

by **Neelesh Misra**.

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